



World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 703, recorded 26 March 1998

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United Nations Convention to Combat
Desertification and Drought

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DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT

Desertification, the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, is putting at risk the lives of one billion people in over one hundred countries. Ambassador Hama Arba Diallo, discusses a wide range of issues related to desertification and its impact on our planet.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:03
Executive Producer:	Chaim Litewski
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

All over the world, deserts are on the move. Human activity and climate change are threatening the dry lands that stretch across more than one third of the earth's land surface. Some one billion people from 110 countries are at risk, according to United Nations figures.

Our guest today is Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought. Born in Burkina Faso, a country affected by desertification, he has a unique perspective on the problem.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Diallo are Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand*. Ambassador Diallo welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Ambassador, we said in the introduction that some billion people from 110 countries are at risk. Does that mean that there are 110 countries that have some area of their land surface as desert?

DIALLO: Indeed, it is countries which are either already affected by desertification or which have been threatened, because desertification is a process. It is degradation, which starts and which, sometimes, takes some time before you can realize it is not an over-the-night effect but to gradually you discover that what you use to plant in an area is no longer sufficient because you need more area to have the same yield or you need more area to have the same ranch lands to be able to feed the animal. So, indeed, according to what we have seen so far, more than 110 countries are reporting very important processes of desertification and -- but the more land degradation -- because we are looking at it as land degradation -- which leads ultimately to deserts. But I was ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this a fairly recent phenomenon or is it something that has been going on for hundreds of years?

DIALLO: It has been going on. But over the last fifty years, we have progress made in medicine, the population has been growing. In my own village the population has gone from -- have been multiplied by 3 or 4 -- which means that you have the same area that is supposed to feed three times the number of people it used to feed or the number of cattle has had to be increased because the cattle that we have today is no longer able to cope with the needs of the population. So the progress in medicine, in most developing countries or even in developed countries has had, as immediate consequence, the fact that you have more people in areas which used to be especially inhabited or you have more cattle just because you have less epidemics and

less droughts -- meaning that you have more sheep, more cows, which are requiring more ranch land.

LITTLEJOHNS: So, Ambassador, would you say that the so-called population explosion is one of the main causes for this or perhaps **the** main cause?

DIALLO: It is a very important cause which, of course, is being aggravated by the fact that you also have some natural droughts. Because over the last thirty ..

LITTLEJOHNS: It's hard to believe that this country with all the rain we've had in recent months

DIALLO: But then you've had rains but you have had also droughts and you look at the El Niño problem in Latin America, in Peru or in Africa, in Somalia of all places. No one would expect the TV to show instances of floods in Somalia. You've been seeing floods of late in Somalia -- just like five months or six months ago, they are talking about droughts. So the El Niño, which is really the best expression we have of climate change has been aggravating and accelerating the processes of the top soil being washed away by droughts or by ... in fact the land is blown away ...

LITTLEJOHNS: ... by droughts or perhaps washed away by the rain.

DIALLO: Exactly. You know. And so then -- and we have been seeing these and in Africa, in Latin America but also in Asia -- I mean -- look at the situation in the countries of Central Asia they are as much affected now. But, of course, the condition in Africa is even worst because of the vulnerability, the poverty, which is just accelerating everything because if you are poor and you have to make a living out of a small plot, then you do not listen much to somebody who tells you that this is not sustainable. They would like to make a living and, therefore, they would just go ahead and plant in as much as they believe that the rainy season is going to come along. If it doesn't come along, bad luck. But if it comes along, at least you have the minimum to go by.

MENON: You know, since 1975, at least the International Community has been focussed on this problem -- 1975 was when the first desertification conference was held. In the 25 years or so since then, has there been any progress made in dealing with this problem?

DIALLO: There have been some limited progress in that in the '70s and '80s, the assumption was that the problem of desertification was of concern to Mali or to Burkina or to Peru or Bolivia, not to the concern of the International Community. It's only since Rio that all of a sudden we are realizing the ...

LITTLEJOHNS: The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

DIALLO: The Earth Summit that we

MENON: Doesn't the world plan of action on desertification go back to 1975?

DIALLO: It does. But in the plan of action, it is calling for action on the part of the affected countries. But since the Conference on the Earth Summit, people have been accepting now the notion that this is a global village. That if no measures are taken to tackle desertification in India or in China or in Mali, this is likely to have an economic, social and global impact worldwide. And it is therefore since Rio, that all of a sudden we are seeing some expressions of compassion and solidarity with local efforts to combat desertification. So we are saying, desertification is an issue which has to be combatted locally but we need international effort, we need international cooperation, so as to bring to the countries concerned the support that they require to be able to achieve some sustainable results.

LESSING: But if expressions of understanding are very important but they don't do a great deal on the ground, how helpful has the Convention been and how much have you been able to move forward. I know it's a very young Convention, but what's been happening?

DIALLO: The Convention is very young -- it's just barely three years old. But the Convention has tried to build up on what had been done in the past and in the past, countries at the governmental level, the non-governmental level, have been active in this area and one should look at some achievements -- be it in countries like Burkina or Mali or Tunisia -- there's been some very serious efforts and some interesting results. But these results are very limited compared to the amplitude of the problem. The problem is so serious that these are only drops in a situation where one could feel that, on a yearly basis, the situation is worsening and the result being that all the problems of food, all the problems of drought, all these are problems which are going to come back and haunt us if nothing is done at present to address the problems but with the full support of the populations in the countries concerned, which is new as a dimension -- the participation of the population is a very important dimension -- which was not really taken into account before.

LESSING: Well can you -- I don't know about anybody else -- but I sort of like to get a particular examples because they bring the question to life. You say there have been some successes -- let's say Mali or in your own country, Burkina Paso, can you tell us about one of them?

DIALLO: Well, the success then would be that in terms of -- because this is an initiating activities to stop the deterioration, reforestation activities, which are very important -- not only village wood lots but family wood lots whereby a family cannot only stop the degradation of its own courtyard or its own field where it cultivates or its own ranch lands -- and these are activities which are proven to be successful, to be owned by the population concerned and where -- but we -- yesterday I realized that we need to do more of that because one of the

main causes of this land degradation is the need for the populations to meet their requirement in energy. More than 80 percent of the energy needs of the households in Africa are being met through wood.

MENON: May I ask you two point of questions taking off from what -- one, is there additional money being committed to desertification programmes? And two, on the population front, it used to be about three decades ago that many African Governments believe that their countries are under-populated not over-populated and the fastest growing populations now are in African countries. What are the government perceptions of these? So two things -- first, money and secondly, population.

DIALLO: Well, the money situation is as tight as anybody could imagine now. But we are only hoping that by demonstrating that the available money can be used in a more efficient manner but also in a very sustainable manner because of projects being funded and which only last as long as external funding is available, this is not going to last long or go far. What we're only hoping that through the Convention, we can show that governments, in collaboration with the affected populations, can come up with activities which would mobilize the local population, mobilize their interest and, therefore, have ensured sustainability but at the same time we believe that this could also help to convince the donor community that these are good activities, efficient activities, which can be sustained.

MENON: But so far, there has been no additional money?

DIALLO: Very limited.

MENON: Very limited.

DIALLO: Very limited. And we are hoping that the Convention really has come to demonstrate or to offer the framework where this partnership can be developed between the donor community and the affected population.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much money do you feel you need, Ambassador?

DIALLO: Well, we have not put a figure on it. But we are only saying that, at present, the lack of action against desertification is costing us \$42 billion per year.

MENON: In lost income?

DIALLO: In lost income. And the top soil that is being washed away, the degradation related to deforestation, salinisation -- all these are having this impact essentially in the poorest countries on this planet.

MENON: I've read one estimate which says that you need an additional 20-22 billion a year in expenditures on anti-desertification programmes in order to make some progress against this problem.

DIALLO: Well, the Convention is asking countries to come up with

programmes of action which will be really initiated by the countries concerned, developed by the countries together with the local populations and the NGO community, but we are waiting for them to come forward at the next session of the composite party to show us what is it that they deem to be -- what is required. Then, also, let us see also in that programme of action, how much commitment there is on their part. Are they going to do some land reform? Give access to women? Because oftentimes, women are part of the scene -- they are actors and oftentimes when it comes to decision-making, you realize that women are not participating in the decision-making process and, therefore, they are not a party to decision which are taken and we believe that the Convention is offering an opportunity to have more gender balance in the decision-making process. So I believe that all those factors can help us to have, in two year's time, some programmes of action which will be fully backed by the affected communities, but which would also would land itself to support from the International Community.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought.

On the gender question, Judy?

LESSING: No, I want to go on into something quite different. It's not only an increase in population that puts more stress on the land. Sometimes, it's perfectly lousy central government decisions. For example, in Central Asia, when it was all part of the Old Soviet Union, there was this insistence on tearing up the little farms and having cotton -- cotton as far as the eye could see. And that was terrible for the land, it pulled away water, it increased salinisation -- it was a disaster -- I don't even know whether it's still going on or not. But what do you do about that sort of policy because now, you've got some international borders on the way.

DIALLO: Well, but to the countries concerned -- Kazakhstan, in particular -- they are very -- they have been sensitized to the need for them to take action. And now that these are decisions to be taken, not only by the Government of Kazakhstan, but by the local communities concerned who are being consulted about what needs to be done in the agricultural area. If cultivating cotton is bad, what are the options? But we are hoping that the International Community will be by the side of the populations of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in helping them change the course of things because if the rivers, which feed into the Aral Sea, continue to be cut from the Aral Sea, then you are likely to see the Aral Sea taking again the role that it had in the past. So, we believe that the International Community should be seen showing interest, showing care, about the need for all of them because, if those actions are not taken, then we are all going to be affected by the consequences of this action. You're talking about Kazakhstan, we could have talked about Mauritania or Mali or Botswana or Lesotho. These are measures which

are necessary, but this is the first time that the population concerned are being asked what is it that you want to grow? What is it that you want to raise as a cattle and through this process, which is now possible because of the democratization process, has been taking roots in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America and this is a good thing because without this participatory process, the possibilities for good action are limited.

LESSING: It may be the same question, I'm not sure -- but these countries need help fixing the mess that they currently have on their hands, where do they get the help?

DIALLO: Well, this is where we believe that once the International Community knows that this is a big mess, that we need to fix it and we hope that once we convinced the International Community this is needed, then we are hoping that they will be coming along. Over the last four or five or ten years, UNEP has been doing a lot of work

LITTLEJOHNS: United Nations Environment Programme.

DIALLO: The World Bank has been looking into it, but we hope that they will be pushed into bringing in the technical or technological dimension which is necessary in crafting good projects, good programmes to show the way, because the more we wait, the more we are likely to see extremely complicated situation which would be even more costly to resolve than we would, if today solutions are taken to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Diallo, I believe that the United States is one of the countries that has not ratified the Convention. What explanation has been given for that failure?

DIALLO: Well, we have been told that the ratification process is underway and we have really good information that the present administration is looking favourably on the Convention which, indeed, even up to the level of the United States Senate, is being looked at as a Convention to promote better living conditions in the dry lands of the world. So, it is not really an environmental convention *per se* or a developmental convention *per se*, but something in between. And this is really a view, which we hope will be helping to accelerate the ratification process. But we've been told that this is being considered as a priority activity by the present administration and we are looking forward to have an agreement ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Have most of the other developed countries ratified the Convention?

DIALLO: In fact, only the OECD countries have ratified the Convention with the exception of United States, Japan, Australia and New Zealand but we were told that, indeed, for Japan -- I mentioned the US a while ago -- but Japan, we have been told recently is considering actively the ratification process in the present sitting of the Parliament. Meaning, that by this summer, they are very hopeful that Japan will come along with a ratification. We're hoping, as well, that Australia and New Zealand also would just look at this instrument as a way that they can show particularly, for Australia -- Australia has been in the forefront in combatting

land degradation, in combatting desertification -- but we believe that the problems that they may have with the Convention can be addressed because Australia had signed the Convention in 1994 and we hope that they will be able to come along and ratify the Convention and help us with their knowledge, with their experience in combatting land degradation.

MENON: To return to your emphasis on participatory process to the Convention -- isn't there a certain contradiction because all African countries, just about everyone of them, is now in the process of liberalizing their economic regulations of opening up the foreign investment and one of the things that happen when foreign investors come and they decided it's their priorities at work and they basically tell the government: 'look we want to do this and this and this', and the government says 'okay, because you're bringing in investment and technology, we will support you'. And very often, the people who get lost in the shuffle are the local people. Isn't there a certain contradiction between the two processes and if you oppose local interest to foreign interest, who is likely to win out?

DIALLO: Well, we are really hoping that the foreign interest are realized -- are going to realize that it is also in their best interest not to force Mali or Bolivia or Kazakhstan in undertaking activities which, much as they may be financially very interesting immediately, we believe that if they realize that sustainable development is something in which everybody would have to gain in such a process ...

LESSING: But this is not happening because in Nigeria, the human rights activists who were, in fact, environmental activists were the ones who were, you know, executed.

DIALLO: Yeah, but we are saying that when it comes to the utilization of land resources, everybody now is -- but today, the realization of the need to involve the local population is a very recent development. Five years ago, ten years ago, what I've been saying now would not have been valid. But now, people are realizing it and people are consulting projects of the United Nations Development Programme, of programmes or projects of -- the World Bank are going out of their way to consult local population on what is it or how is it to undertake activities in the utilization of natural resources. So this is new and I'm optimistic that if this dialogue goes on, then everyone would realize that the only way or the best way for Africa and Asia or Latin America to participate in the globalization process is by at least taking into account what is it that they can do on terms which are oftentimes very advantageous.

MENON: Do you have a process of consulting corporations?

DIALLO: Well, we are opening up the discussions and indeed we are asking, in every specific setting, that the discussion be as wide as possible so as to include the NGO community, the private sector, as well. And we are hoping that the private sector would be coming in and participate in the process because the private sector, as well, will be gaining in --

participating in activities which will not be a one-shot matter or just a one-year affair, but something which can yield the results and the results which will be very important in improving the economic and social conditions of the population concerned as well as making sure that this is going to be feasible in the generations to come.

LESSING: Ambassador Diallo, just going on with that, have you got a lot of faith that developed countries and the private sector are really willing to put in to the dry lands of the world really important technical and scientific advances. In other words, are people willing to share and are companies willing to share the results of their research and development?

DIALLO: I have the impression that they are willing to do so. And we have been, of late, consulting with the private sector, with the academic institutions and I think that they can -- it is until we convince them, it is very difficult to change things from the way they are being done at present and that you are describing in Kazakhstan or in Mali or in Lesotho. But how can you do that? And this is an exercise where the private sector should wait until we have done everything for them just to come and invest, I think, this is the process where we would all gain if -- and the participatory process is a process whereby you are not going to wait until everybody has decided on what needs to be done for you to come and say, 'no, this has to be changed.' So we are hoping that this process is a process which up to local level, up to national level, is going to involve all stake holders and it is only through this process that we can bring in the common wisdom of all concerned in identifying activities and implementing activities in a way that would improve the economic conditions in the countries concerned but would also make sure that for the generation to come, there would be something to do and that they will not be only left with pieces of land which are no longer usable.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Diallo, we have less than a minute left -- you've mentioned understandably the problems of Africa from where you yourself come but, in fact, Asia is about the worst affected every year isn't it?

DIALLO: Asia is affected and you take a country like China. There are 400 million Chinese who live in areas which are affected by desertification and we are saying, therefore, that if one is to change, I think that the call for change is now. We need to change. So Asia is affected, we have China, we have India as well which are affected, we have Mongolia and the other countries of Central Asia and we do believe that the programmes of action which have been called for and that which we should be receiving the first reports in two year's time should indicate what is it that the countries are intending to do.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Diallo, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought.

He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.